CHAPTER 10

Recontextualizing Michael Jackson's Blackness

This chapter begins with a brief overview of critical discourse relating to ethnicity and Michael Jackson, and it considers Jackson's representation and his perceived blackness (or lack thereof) as tied to a historic chain of events that often have very little to do with Jackson himself or his music. This chapter continues by outlining ideological constructions surrounding Jackson and Afrocentricity, a movement "centred or focusing on Africa or on cultures of African origin" in "North American black culture" (*OED*). Then it gives an overview of race and culture as presented in the short films *Remember the Time*, directed by John Singleton in 1992, and *They Don't Care About Us*, directed by Spike Lee in 1996, to illustrate Jackson's Afrocentric self-expression through his art in this period.

> "The African people had given us gifts of courage and endurance that we couldn't hope to repay."
>
> —Michael Jackson[1]

As early modern critics like Ania Loomba have regularly asserted, the legacy of race and racial representation has a long and twisted past, and it is mired in the racial stereotyping that began hundreds of years before Michael Jackson's birth.[2] As Loomba suggests, the history of "race" is "both protracted and erratic," and it consists of "a range of concepts, theories and mechanisms for assigning different values to human beings [that] arise and mutate, go dormant, resurface, relocate and adapt anew."[3] The study of ethnicity is complex at the best of times. The very notion that English, Dutch, and Spanish people came to the conclusion that the dark-skinned people of the African continent

were, by virtue of their complexions, uncivilized, beastly, and oversexed, making them inherently less human than their white counterparts, remains at the heart of any debate, since "it was in fact the 'erasure of Africa from the civilized world, and the reinterpretation of "blackness" as monstrous and unnatural' that "allowed for the construction of a European race."[4] Academic Harvey Young, in the monograph *Race and Theatre*, explores how these centuries-old constructions of race connect to the 20th-century American presentation of race as a theatrical act: "race and racial thinking stem from a basic human desire for orientation," and "should not be dismissed as either a mere fiction or an anachronism"; while race "did not attain widespread use until the late nineteenth century," it is one of several factors that complicate representations of blackness.[5]

For Young, American culture made blackness a performative, and actors were applauded for the use of "blackface," which became particularly popular around 1830–1965 in the United States, further enforcing constructed ideas around skin complexion as a marker of difference.[6] However, what further complicates Jackson's story is the emergence of his skin condition, vitiligo, which transformed his brown skin to a translucent white.[7] This rapid color change flew directly in the face of the dominant blackface performative construction, in which white people, from the Queen of England in 1608, all the way to the stage actors of the 20th century, wore black makeup in caricature of black people for the entertainment of predominantly white audiences.[8] This is discussed in some great detail by Harriet Manning in *Michael Jackson and the Blackface Mask*.[9] However, it does serve to highlight the fact that "there is little truth in the blackface representation," but it became so popular that "black artists who wanted to perform on the stage frequently discovered that they too had to apply burnt cork."[10] Interestingly enough, "the black character, the caricatured performance of black folk, never aligned with the *actual* appearance, behavior, or presumably, style of speech of African-Americans, blackface performances required the same skill of black artists as they did of non-black artists."[11]

A real irony remains in Jackson being perceived as a traitor to his race ("you hate your race baby," he sings in the track "Morphine") for being perceived to have attempted to cross the boundary from black to white.[12] This irony is found in the fact that white people have been racially cross-dressing for entertainment purposes for centuries: "the ability of the white man to become black and to channel blackness was rewarded with thunderous applause."[13] The early modern period and the transatlantic slave trade were very much responsible for destabilizing the primacy, originality, and the early wisdom of African people in Western culture, commonly accepted by playwrights such

as Ben Jonson in the early 17th century and reiterated by the depictions of a dark-skinned African king in the Adoration of the Magi.[14]

There is a common and almost persistent misconception that Jackson attempted, in both literal and metaphoric ways, to erase his ethnicity. This is clearly outlined by Oprah Winfrey's question to Jackson in his 1993 interview with her: "Are you bleaching your skin and is your skin lighter because you don't like being black?"[15] As Oprah's question illustrates, the arguments on the subject of Jackson's blackness consist of three false claims: 1) that Jackson purposely changed his skin from black to white; 2) that Jackson's music similarly shifted from being inherently urban (black) to mainstream (white); 3) that Jackson changed both his music and his skin because of a dislike of being black. The fact that all three of these claims were categorically false did not do anything to stop them gaining traction in the mass media and on the street. This chapter examines the ways in which these claims are inherently false, as well as their ideological origins.

A range of debates have circled around Michael Jackson and ethnicity for decades, and these are most clearly laid out in Joseph Vogel's article "Re-Screening Black Masculinity in Michael Jackson's 'Black or White'," in relation to the film *Birth of a Nation* (which Jackson references in his short film), produced and screened in one of the most racially volatile moments in American history.[16] An insightful overview of how Jackson's view toward black people and Africans was exhibited and how it was interpreted largely by the mainstream media in 1992 is given in Grant's *Visual Documentary*, for example:

> The trip was a "public relations disaster for Michael." Truth: It was a triumph in which he drew more spectators in Gabon than Nelson Mandela and more in the Ivory Coast than the Pope . . .
>
> He refused to shake hands with Africans. Truth: He shook the hands of hundreds of people, hugged and kissed children in hospitals and institutions for the mentally retarded (sic).[17]

The cultural concerns regarding Jackson's personal appearance and music were intrinsically connected to endemic and prevalent cultural issues at the heart of Americana—issues discussed in great detail in Margo Jefferson's *On Michael Jackson*.[18] Jackson was born into the discourse of slavery and prejudice that lies under the surface of his representation. It is evident that Jackson did not attempt, at any point, to erase his ethnicity. He suffered from a hereditary skin condition called vitiligo, and his autopsy report confirmed this.[19] In the book *Turning White: A Memoir of Change*, the African American journalist

Lee Thomas outlines in great detail the personal effects of the depigmentation process of vitiligo.[20] The process was featured several years earlier in an *Ebony* article, "The Man Who Turned White"; interestingly enough, this article was rarely mentioned in conjunction with Jackson.[21]

By 1991, Jackson's vitiligo had rendered his body a patchwork of pigmented and depigmented skin, an emotionally troubling process, which Thomas both describes and photographs, illustrating the ways it transformed his skin and how clearly it reduced his ethnicity, on which so much significance has been placed by history and culture. "It's more than turning white," he writes, "it's becoming void of color."[22] This disease gave Lee "moments of despair and lifted [him] into amazingly euphoric epiphanies . . . kept him locked behind closed doors and sent [him] out to shout into the biggest microphone [he] could find."[23] Furthermore, Lee asserts that "bleaching is one of the recommended treatments if you have the disease over eighty percent of your body."[24] For Jackson himself, inside the viewing glass of his role as the most observed person on the planet, vitiligo may well have been as devastating as it was for Lee:

> It began with tiny seeds of whiteness, mysteriously sprinkled onto my brown skin, that suddenly sprouted into small circles. With ravenous, ruthless hunger, these discs of discoloration devoured every drop of pigment along their smooth and scalloped edges. The whiteness blossomed across my torso . . . my nose . . . my lips. It twined around my hands and feet, weaving pale gloves and boots in its wake.[25]

Although Jackson spoke sparingly about his skin condition, he did speak about it. The earliest occasion was 1993: "I have a skin disorder which destroys the pigmentation of the skin, it's something that I cannot help;" but what is more telling is how Jackson highlights the hypocrisy of America: "what about all the millions of people who sit in the sun, to become darker, to become other than what they are, no one says nothing about that."[26] In 1996 Jackson also briefly referred to the disorder, saying, "my skin condition has gotten worse, I hate to say it. I have vitiligo, and I'm totally completely allergic to the sun . . . Even if I'm in the shade the sun rays can destroy my skin."[27] Therefore, we can ascertain that Jackson did suffer from a skin-altering disease and that this disease restricted his life, as well as his ability to move freely and express himself. The way in which Jackson managed his visual representation with makeup, to ensure his splotches and uneven skin remained hidden from the public, served to alienate audiences from believing he actually suffered from the disorder. This became ammunition for those who were primarily horrified at the ways in which Jackson seemed to be controverting

dominant constructions of race. Jackson's transformation seemed to be producing a perplexing reversal and upturning of negative stereotypes, by showing that a black person could become white, thus threatening the construction of white identity. Kim F. Hall discusses literary whiteness in particular, and she argues that the refusal to even discuss whiteness as an ethnicity asserts that ethnic variation applies solely to non-whites.[28] This double standard pervades all of Jackson's representations and fuels his vilification when based on ethnicity.

Jackson's vitiligo aside, however, one may still ask how Afrocentric Jackson actually was, and how, if in any way, he asserted and affirmed his Afrocentricity in his music and short films. To further contextualize Jackson's ethnicity, his music became not "whiter," but "blacker," as his career progressed. He would continue to use elements of funk, soul, and gospel as intrinsic components of his compositions. He would also continue to emulate James Brown, Chuck Berry, Jackie Wilson, and even Mavis Staples for the entire breadth of his career. Jackson remained exceedingly black in all the ways that it mattered, and to illustrate this, we will consider two key texts—the short films *Remember the Time*, directed by John Singleton in 1991, and *They Don't Care About Us*, directed by Spike Lee in 1995.[29] These two texts have been chosen because, more than any others, they exemplify Jackson's blackness, in terms of musicality, physical expression, dance, and filmmaking. What is incredible, upon research of these key themes and ideas, however, is the fact that Jackson manages, through his art, to repeatedly inhabit Afrocentric ideological spaces, and every time he does so, he presents images of blackness that are of high status, ranging from his costumes in regal wear with kingly insignia, to his presentation of a black cast as part of the ruling class of ancient Egypt in his short film *Remember the Time*.[30]

REMEMBER THE TIME AND *THEY DON'T CARE ABOUT US*

Shot in Los Angeles in 1991 and directed by black director John Singleton, *Remember the Time* boasts an entirely African American cast that includes the black model Iman as the beautiful Egyptian queen, with the successful black comedian Eddie Murphy as her king.[31] In the short film, Jackson plays a maverick magician who appears in the balmy restful peace of the Egyptian palace, which is inhabited by a queen so bored that she kills subjects who fail to entertain her. The short film references the fact that ancient Egyptians were Africans and—far from depictions of Elizabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra*, with lily-white skin—were far more likely to be dark-skinned.[32] This brings to mind the Ife sculptures found in Benin in West Africa, which date back to the 14th

century and feature heads with negroid features.[33] Black people do have a rich history of African autonomy and self-rule, which had long been denied by the American establishment, preferring a narrative of white supremacy and domination, supported by the flourishing of the slave trade, but this is only a small portion of Africa and the African story. Africa was, in fact, made up of black kingdoms for millennia, which traded throughout the entire world.[34] Jackson, whose personal library had extensive books on the subject, used *Remember the Time* to showcase blackness in not only a positive light, but in terms of a ruling class. He showed that there were black kings and princes, not just black servants, mammies, harlots, Mandingos, and brutes, as often seen in Hollywood cinema.[35] Jackson's depiction of Magic Johnson in a role of authority is also striking, as is the dance sequence in which all of the actors and dancers are black. Jackson showcases a cinematic world where all people are black Africans, and the cinematography is sumptuous, golden, and rich, thus arguing, similarly, that not only are black people in the ruling class of the diegesis of *Remember the Time*, they permeate all classes. Jackson's run from the black guards who work for the Pharaoh, the supreme ruler of ancient Egypt, lead him to the marketplace, where alluring women dance around him, protecting him and shielding him, and he shares a passionate embrace and kiss with the queen herself. Jackson highlights not just blackness in *Remember the Time*, but far more important, black affirmation. Through his depiction of an entire cast of black actors, as in the films *The Wiz*, *Stormy Weather*, and *Porgy and Bess*, he demonstrates that a black-only production can be performed and enacted. This is not simply because blacks and whites are societally segregated, but because blacks had a unique story to tell, a story that was entirely their own, about their time as the supreme civilization of the world, and on that they can base their own culture and sense of pride.[36]

To similar effect, Jackson displays Afrocentricity in the short films for *They Don't Care About Us*. The first was shot in Rio de Janeiro (Dona Marta in the quarter Botafogo) and Salvador de Bahia, Brazil, in February 1996 and was directed by Spike Lee.[37] The short film, set in favelas of Brazil, showcases people of African descent in diaspora, as Jackson follows the trajectory of the Africans sold in the transatlantic slave trade and transported to be chattel across the world. Slaves were taken not only to the West Indies but also to America and the sugar plantations of Brazil, where they would live, separated, cut off from their homeland, having to re-create their black culture and their black pride, though underprivileged and members of the underclass. It's a picture painted again throughout the world, from South Africa to the United States. In the short film, Jackson aligns himself with the diasporic population of the black community in Brazil and highlights the poverty in the slums and favelas of the entire world by aligning himself with his black brothers and sisters,

dancing with the people in the streets and—most important—taking part in beating several dozen rhythmic drums.

These drums are significantly African in origin, and they beat out the syncopated rhythms at the heart of black and predominantly African culture. These drums form the heart of Jackson's chant, his battle cry against the injustice that he sees inflicted upon blacks (injustice that is both without any real logical basis and endemic in the systems of the world), no matter where he goes. In his dance with the black children of the favelas (and once again, filling every shot with black people), Jackson highlights the "us" as the black communities of the world, and the "they" as those who persecute black people and subjugate them for political and societal gain. It is poignant that Jackson was regarded by predominantly white journalists as a racist for his use of racial slurs in this song. Armond White rightly declares this as ignorance and dismissal thinly veiled, with Jackson's message clouded unnecessarily in a smokescreen of fake indignation.[38]

These are just two brief opportunities to discuss Jackson's evident Afrocentricity in terms of black culture, dance, song, power, and aesthetics, and they have been considered in relation to just two of his works. The theme of Afrocentricity extends to many key areas of Jackson's career, for example, giving interviews to black publications, *Ebony* and *Jet*; working closely with black artists and musicians like Quincy Jones, Greg Phillinganes, and Rodney Jerkins III; and Jackson's insistence on predominantly black sounds in his music and ethnic diversity in his short films, from Ola Ray in *Thriller* in 1983, all the way to Chris Tucker in *You Rock My World* in 2001. His Afrocentricity is evident in the track "Liberian Girl," discussed in great detail in Chapter 4—"Narrative in the Songs of Michael Jackson's *Bad*," as well as with his moonwalk, which Jackson learned from black children, because, in his words, "black children in the ghettos . . . have the most phenomenal rhythm of anybody on the Earth . . . it definitely started within the black culture. No doubt. And that's where it comes from."[39] In addition, the short film for the track "Bad," directed in 1987 by Martin Scorsese, is a testament to Jackson's dedication to Afrocentrism and shows repeated affirmations of blackness, especially the poverty often associated with being black in America and the drive to aspire to new heights.[40] Scorsese said of the short film, "we came up with this idea based on a real incident in Harlem" and "put Michael in with black actors in Harlem and we shot the dramatic sequences in black and white."[41]

The unjustified ideas that Michael Jackson did not like being black, did not affirm his blackness, or did not feel pride in being a black man were unequivocally rebuffed throughout his life. He disproved those ideas not only in his short films and in his music, but also in his interviews (which were often

given intentionally to black interviewers like Jesse Jackson and Oprah Winfrey), showing how much Jackson felt comfortable among people of his own ethnicity, who he clearly felt would be more sympathetic to him. The claim that Jackson purposely changed his skin was a complete fabrication that served to justify a racist assertion that any black man would desire to become white in the first place. This racist assertion is as old as Ben Jonson's 1608 *Masque of Blackness*, which enacts the proverb of "turning the Ethiop white," making a black person apparently white (see Appendix A1—"From Object to Subject: A Critical Survey on the Representation of Blackness in the Early Modern Period" and Appendix A2—" 'With All His Beauteous Race': High-Status Blacks in *The Masque of Blackness* and *The Merchant of Venice*").[42]

The claim that Jackson's music style shifted from being inherently "black" to being more "mainstream" was also a fabrication. Jackson offered a less mainstream and more rhythmic sound in his later career. In addition, Jackson's so called racial confusion was a third and final fallacy. What Jackson's work did, which was perhaps most controversial in America, was to show black people as a whole, and himself in particular, in positions of high status, which jarred greatly with the American culture of blacks as subjugated and segregated second-class citizens. However, what was spectacular about Jackson's Afrocentrism was how well articulated and consistent it was, and how little it rose up against the claims of his critics. He chose instead to remain synonymous with a message of peace and harmony. Jackson never showed a hierarchy of racial representation, and he opted instead for a message of egalitarianism for all ethnicities.

In closing, it is also important to remember that, for all the heights Jackson reached in his phenomenal career, he remained a black man from a poor neighborhood in Gary, Indiana, the eighth of 10 children. In his autobiography, Jackson writes about wanting to visit the South to get close to his roots as an American: "we had never been to the South then and wanted to visit . . . to have a sense of our roots and those of other black people."[43] Jackson remained implicitly black and explicitly homogeneous, in order to remain relatable to his wide audience. Jackson remained a proud possessor of his heritage, and he both affirmed and supported it in all the ways that were available to him, and in ways his audiences could never have expected.